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CAUSES OF THE SUCCESS OR THE FAILURE OF FIRST-YEAR BOYS IN A VOCATIONAL SCHOOL

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While the conclusions reached in this article are not based upon tables of statistics, formulated after an exhaustive survey of the work of the pupils under consideration; it may be said that the statements recorded here are authentic, as the facts were secured during a series of individual interviews with a large number of first-year boys, some of whom would be labeled "successful," while the others, if judged by ordinary standards, would be considered "failures."

These pupils were interviewed in an informal and friendly manner after a rather large amount of written evidence as to their earlier school standing, their physical condition, and their record in the Vocational School up to the date of the investigation had been very carefully studied. These three sets of school documents told a great deal of the life-story of each pupil. The grammar-school records gave something of his heredity, his home environment, and his physical, mental, and moral make-up. The record of the physical examination, made when he entered the Vocational School, was a most valuable help, and the written comments of the vocational teachers upon the work of each pupil in every academic subject and in all technical work completed a record which is probably as perfect as such records can be made.

A study of the cards recording the physical examination established the fact that the physical needs of the pupils had been well cared for in the primary and the grammar grades. There were almost no cases of neglected adenoids or tonsils, and the eyesight of the pupils had evidently received very careful attention.

From the individual comments of the vocational teachers it was comparatively easy to reach the conclusion that the entering

boys, numbering approximately one hundred, could be divided into three groups which might be appropriately designated as "successful," "doubtful," and "failures."

In the group labeled "successful" were the boys from the eighth grades of the Newton schools who had elected to enter the Vocational School, plus a considerable number from the corresponding grade of some of the adjacent towns and cities. These boys entered the school with a well-defined purpose and, in many cases, after a careful estimate as to the boy's probable success or failure in industrial work had been made by his grammar-school principal. Sometimes this estimate was based upon certain technical or so-called prevocational tests. That is, the boy had shown a special aptitude in printing or in some form of wood or metal work, or he had done some clever bit of work which pointed toward success in electrical or engineering lines.

This group of pupils, who were for the most part grammar-school graduates, presented comparatively few problems, and the experience of past years proves that they form a large percentage of the number completing the four years' course and in the natural order of events entering upon their life-work well equipped physically, mentally, and morally.

In searching for the causes of the success of these boys we are forced to the conclusion that of all the factors shaping a boy's life the most vital is the kind of ideas and ideals which are habitually presented in his home. Poverty, anxiety, sickness, and even tragedy, may be there, but if the father or the mother, or both of them, is strong morally and alert mentally, if the parents possess a fund of valuable ideas, if their ideals are high, if, even in the absence of what is commonly called education, there is sensible, intelligent conversation, high aims in regard to conduct and work, and an absence of silly, cheap, frivolous talk and conduct in the home, the viewpoint of the boy in regard to life and work is almost always right; and if he possesses good health and receives skilful training and good advice in school, his success in his chosen vocation is almost assured.

A second vital element of success is a good school organization—one in which the work is so systematized that every pupil has not

only skilful, expert instructors, but also an adviser, to whom he turns in a perfectly natural manner for any advice that he may need. This adviser must, of course, be in close touch with the pupil's home, but he must be very much more expert in diagnosing the boy's mental difficulties and in adjusting them than is the average parent. In fact, the public has the right to demand that this type of teacher—an expert in the reading of character and in estimating mentality, and a broad-minded humanitarian, who is also very familiar with conditions in industry—shall be found in every vocational school. There is necessarily a very large amount of readjustment in any well-conducted school of this kind. It is impossible to decide, until he has made a trial of the work, whether John Smith will succeed in the cabinet-making department, and oftentimes his prolonged stay in that work is one of vexation to his teacher and to himself and a costly economic error. The investigations of a competent adviser, a frank talk with the boy and his parents by a person who is alert to all the boy's possibilities, would result in John's trying another kind of work in which he would probably be more successful.

In selecting these advisers great care should be taken that they are of the type that can read character. Many very skilful instructors have little insight into mental processes, and such persons, while doing very important work as instructors, should not be placed on the list of pupils' advisers.

The pupils in the group being considered had no formally designated advisers, but it was evident that many of them had been strongly influenced by the advice of some instructor to whom they had instinctively turned in their time of need. A carefully selected group of advisers is ready now to meet the needs of these pupils.

A valuable adjunct to a stimulating home environment and skilful instruction, training, and advice that meets individual needs at school is some social organization. The one that was evidently the most potent force in the lives of the boys under consideration was that of the Boy Scouts. As the year went on it was observed that there was a distinct development in manliness, resourcefulness, and the desire to co-operate in all ways for the

good of the entire school body on the part of the boys who were active members of this organization.

In the group of successful boys studied, their development in power of intelligent and forceful expression was especially noticed. This improvement was traced directly to the training in the presentation of oral themes in the English classes. The boys talked upon processes and work with which they were entirely familiar, and their oral themes were clothed in clear statements and forceful and appropriate language. The improvement in the spoken language of the first-year pupils was very marked. It was noticed also that a large percentage of the successful boys were readers, and from the cards in the small school library, and the reports of instructors who kept in circulation collections of books from the public library and a large number of periodicals supplied by the school, it was found that a considerable amount of intelligent reading and discussion of current events and of historical, biographical, and scientific reading was accomplished by these pupils.

In considering the pupils whose work must be regarded as unsatisfactory we find such individual reports as these: "*Report upon the shopwork of James Jones*—This boy is very heedless; does not follow directions; careless in the use of tools; shows no aptitude for technical work; very clumsy and seems confused and stupid." The record in regard to the same boy from his teacher in English is as follows: "This boy is easily interested in reading and has improved in ability to express his thoughts clearly." His instructor in mathematics says: "James Jones is unable to make any progress in mathematics because of his lack of knowledge of the simplest processes." Another instructor reports: "This boy seems willing, but evidently fails to comprehend his work. He should be given the Binet test."

James Jones was called to the office, where an informal and sympathetic investigation brought out the following facts: The boy was the youngest of six children; he was fourteen years of age, but undersized, and his appearance would indicate that he was imperfectly nourished. It required considerable patience and diplomacy to draw from him any coherent statement as to conditions that would explain his failure to measure up to the standing

of the average boy of fourteen years. The story, as finally pieced together, was one familiar to every instructor who conducts similar investigations: a crowded home, poverty, some minor sicknesses resulting in a slipping-back in the school grades, no mental stimulus at home or specially skilful help at school, and the Vocational School opportunities seized upon by the grammar-school principal as a possible solution of the difficulty. Therefore, without a careful examination of the boy to determine whether he gave any signs of probable ability in technical lines of work, he had been sent to the Vocational School.

In a great many cases, as in the one described above, the method of procedure fails to achieve the hoped-for results. In this instance the boy showed no aptitude for tools or technical work and exhibited many evidences of confusion of mind and clumsiness in handwork in all the shopwork attempted. The result is that in too many cases boys of this type leave the Vocational School at the earliest opportunity, drifting into any occupation to which they can turn their hand. It would have been better in the case of such a boy as the one described—a boy who evidently had no aptitude whatever for technical work—if he had been kept in the grammar school until he had finished the grammar-school course. Such talents as he had were in the line of academic, rather than technical, tasks. With special help and advice in the grammar school he might possibly have entered in time the regular high school and taken a general or a business course, from which, under specially favorable conditions, he could have entered upon work as a clerk or an office boy. In the absence of favoring conditions he would have become one of the “hewers of wood and drawers of water,” of which, fortunately, the world always stands in need.

An interesting case which proves that the estimate of even a very competent instructor as to the latent talent of a pupil is not always correct, and that some actual tests of ability are necessary, was proved in the case of a boy whom we will call Tom Brown. Tom's academic record was passable, but his shop teacher pronounced him hopelessly stupid in the handling of tools. The director sent for Tom, and after a brief conversation told the boy to watch his movements for a few moments. The director then

took apart a complicated tool and turning to the boy he requested him to put it together again. This he did promptly and accurately. He was then asked to observe the separation into its parts of a still more complicated tool, and he succeeded in uniting these parts into a perfect whole. It was evident that the boy had a keen eye, deftness of touch, and that he was of the motor-minded type of pupil. A determined but sympathetic probing followed, and the causes of his failure to do good work in the shop were found to be due to the stubbornness of undisciplined and ignorant youth and to a lack of understanding as to the importance of individual work. He was sent back to the shops after his instructor had been thoroughly informed as to the facts in the case, and finished the year's work successfully and will return with the prospect of taking the other three years of training.

After a very careful investigation of the "failures" among the first-year boys—an investigation in which several boys were given the Binet test by an expert in mental hygiene—we reached the conclusion that by far the greatest percentage of failures is among a group of boys who were sent in from the fifth and sixth grades of the grammar school. These were lads of fourteen years who for various reasons had lagged behind their mates and given indications of dropping out of school at the first opportunity. Some of these low-grade pupils respond to the stimuli of the vocational shop and academic training and are doubtless saved by that training to lives of useful service. A certain percentage of these young lads are, however, misplaced when they are sent to the Vocational School, and this misplacement, as has been said, is a costly economic error: the time of expert instructors, the use of costly machinery and tools, in fact, the whole school organization, is diverted in a large degree from the possible and satisfactory tasks of training boys who could become skilful workers and leaders in the industrial world to the impossible one of training boys without any aptitude for technical work.

The facts in the case seem to be these: In some grammar schools fourteen-year-old boys of the type commonly called low grade are given the most careful attention by their instructors and principals. Certain mental tests are given them, and a series

of technical tasks are presented which demonstrate sufficiently the fact as to the boy's motor-mindedness or the reverse. Sometimes these careful tests prove that the boy is not of the type that could be most successfully stimulated by the work of a vocational school. He has no great talent or capacity of any kind, but such gifts as he has are all in the direction that can best be reached by well-planned special instruction in the regular channels of grammar-school work. When this is the case, it is a serious error to transfer him to the Vocational School, where, confused and discouraged by the demands of shopwork for which he has no capacity and academic work for which he is imperfectly prepared, he becomes completely discouraged and drops out of school.

If we were to summarize the causes of failure in a vocational school we might say that they are:

- a) An unfortunate heredity which manifests itself in weak or confused mentality or in an enfeebled physical condition.
- b) A lack of mental stimulus in the home.
- c) A gradual dropping below in the grades due to frequent absences caused by minor illnesses.
- d) A lack of special help and advice from any person competent to give it.
- e) Entering a vocational school without having received any special tests that would prove the boy's fitness for that line of work.
- f) Attempting some line of vocational work for which the pupil has no aptitude.
- g) The personal habits of the pupil. A comparatively small percentage of cigarette smokers was found among the "failures."

If we sum up the causes of the success of our first-year boys, we shall find:

- a) A stimulating personality in the home, either father or mother or both.
- b) Good advice and a skilful method of examination in the grammar school with a view to placing each boy sent on where he could profit best by the instruction.
- c) Good health.
- d) A well-organized vocational school.

- e) Excellent instruction and skilful training in the vocational work attempted.
- f) The elimination of persons of very limited education and of narrow mental vision from the corps of shop instructors.
- g) The influence of a sympathetic school adviser—a person of insight into character and one who is in close touch with actual conditions in industry.
- h) The influence of some social organization such as the Boy Scouts.
- i) A series of school "talks" in which questions affecting the future welfare of the pupil are discussed by experts.

In conclusion, we would say that the improvement in physique, manners, mentality, resourcefulness, self-control, and power of expression of the boys who performed successfully the tasks attempted was so great as to make one very hopeful as to the future of these boys and also as to the work of the Vocational School in giving its pupils the training that will make them worthy citizens of their state and country.